

# NAGRA VPA vs. 300P A READER REPORT

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN



SWITZERLAND

Commentator: Michele Surdi

Source: Nagra CDC, 2011Macbook Air, PureMusic 1.8, HRT Streamer 2

Amps: Nagra VPA, Nagra 300p, FirstWatt F5

Speakers: Tannoy Yorkminster, Harbeth P3 ESR

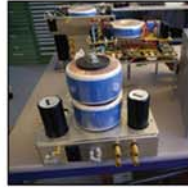
Cables: Van den Hul Inspiration biwire, The First, The Second balanced

Power: Cablerie d'Eupen, Black Magic 4

Stands: Guizu SRW2A, Music Tools One



Last man standing. Shootouts are good clean fun. If they are to be of any use to prospective buyers - and all audiophiles no matter how straitened their circumstances answer to this description - they must follow one basic rule. No sense in comparing components built on opposing design philosophies or placed at wildly different price points. [I'd beg to differ entirely. Michele's First Watt F5 transistor amp would make a most excellent comparator on bandwidth, distortion and value - i.e. what do the far costlier valve amps offer which it doesn't; and where might the solid-state amp actually show its valve brethren a clean set of heels. - Ed.]



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That said, a match between my reference Nagra VPAs and Nagra's new and newly acquired 300p amp seemed mandatory particularly since they would be evaluated in an all Nagra rig with speakers particularly attuned - good word placement there - to their strong points. This is hardly a coincidence. Both my 6-year old Tannoy Yorkminsters and latest model Harbeth P3 shoeboxes were bought specifically because of their phase - impedance characteristics. Those result in a maximum current draw of just above  $4\Omega$  resistive in the Tannoys and a tranquilizing  $5\Omega$  equivalent for the teeny Harbeths.

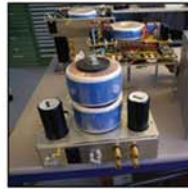


Notice that no consideration was taken of the abyss between the Yorkminsters' generous 94dB sensitivity and the P3's glacial 83dB. This because what really matters is that the VPAs' internal impedance is somewhat above  $2\Omega$ , not bad for a feedback - less DHT application but unconscionably high for the ampere vampires in current (pun here too) fashion. Yes I know. The VPA literature seductively mentions Wilsons and Quads. But marketing requirements and Ohm's law never shall meet.

There really is no reason to match speakers of 1 or  $2\Omega$  dips with DHTs. Beam tetrodes and well-applied feedback were invented precisely for this reason. I have no exact figure on the 300p's internal impedance but it should be in the same ballpark as the VPAs' given the similarities in output devices if not overall circuit topology.

The VPAs are in fact semi-traditional designs with conventional signal tubes while the 300p is a determined hybrid, the output bottles being the only glass in town. The VPAs are also fully balanced throughout and though I can't be sure of the 300p, all evaluations were carried out in balanced mode. This configuration audibly bested the single-ended alternative with some fifty hours burn in for the stock JJ tubes. I have no interest in tube rolling by the way. [Having done extensive 300B comparisons, the best valves from the modern Czech camp are the EML and EAT, the best of the WE clan the TJ SE and the best modern Chinese the Synergy Hifi. While each circuit reacts differently, it's a fair assumption that the JJs could be handily beaten - Ed.]

Source was the Nagra CDC in spinner / preamp mode ( 3v output option), with Van den Hul the Second balanced interconnects and Van den Hul 2m Inspiration cables (watch for the 300p's floating ground) biwired to the Tannoys ( quasi - obligatory for dual concentrics in my experience) and single wired to the Harbeths (all speakers shorted when



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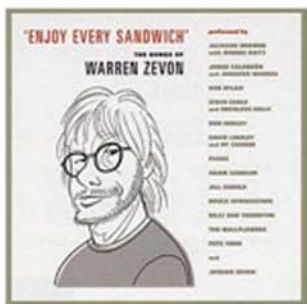


not in use). The P3s were Blu-tacked on their dedicated 60cm Music Tools stands, floor spiked but undamped in keeping with Harbeth's vibrating enclosure design philosophy.

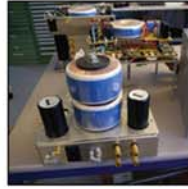


CDs played were very well-known classics, not to say chestnuts, to obtain a familiar reference point and spare readers stultifying descriptions of my personal reactions to obscure tracks of Taiwanese klezmer, Kazakh bluegrass, whatever. Wrecking Ball was chosen because of Daniel Lanois' well-known genius for unrealistic production, La Folia for the opposite reason, Savall being a purist recording artist. Gould's prodigy Goldberg performance made the cut because of my familiarity with the piano both in domestic and concert surrounds.

The last is admittedly an unpretentious technical effort but to my ears that makes it all the more valuable as an evaluation tool. No big orchestral pieces, which I think are mostly compromised by domestic reproduction. And no 19th century opera which I don't like. Also no compressed juvie schlock which is a ridiculous complement to top tier gear, Cretin Hop indeed. And then just to show it's not all snark, I put on Enjoy Every Sandwich in loving memory.



Parameters taken into consideration besides sonic excellence were commercial reliability and customer service, which are of paramount importance at these prices; build and finish; and lastly and crucially price - value ratio. This is a minor consideration or major encumbrance for most professional reviewers but all important to the



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consumer. As concerns commercial credibility and customer care, my experiences with Nagra recently recounted in the Letters section have been wholly satisfying while fit and finish of both amplifiers are world class. Purely from the standpoint of construction ingenuity the 300p must be considered superior as attested by Srajan's photos. On the downside turning this amp off lightly thumps the speakers, a minor black mark in my opinion since the very high voltage VPAs are literally deadly silent. Operation for both amps is plug and play with perfect bias out of the box. This leaves all-round performance and price-value considerations as the defining parameters.

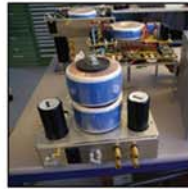


First things first. Because of rational speaker matching the 300p's lower power figures - 20 watts per channel, whatever that may mean, to the VPAs' 50 - did not come into the picture. Even the obdurate Harbeths never pushed the meters (modulometers in Nagra's stolid speak) beyond 5 watts, this at listening volumes appropriate to the recordings played in a largish and quite reflecting venue. All right, but how do they sound?



I must note that I've had sufficient experience with pentodes and beam tetrodes, everything from ECL82s to KT88s, but no truck with 300B triodes despite living some seven years with the big 845s. I was somewhat disconcerted then when my initial impressions pointed to a likeness which went well beyond the Nagra family sound, alliteratively annotated as clear collected and most of all coherent. To amplify - third pun in a row - a bit: when paired with an appropriate load, the VPAs are above all unflappable in their ability to create a vast sonic picture with absolutely no emphasis on any frequency band particularly in the mid and low bass regions. They materialize and then disappear either gradually or quickly in perfect obedience to the recorded signal, always keeping in mind that bass evaluation is room dependent.

By the same token the excellent microdynamics translate as an extremely low noise floor in the mids and highs with no trace of etching or sterility, the final result being best described as sunlit with all the natural warmth and clarity the term implies. That said, for the first 2 hours or so I simply could not find any significant difference between the two



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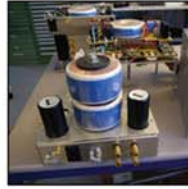
amps to the extent that I would have been unable to single out one or the other with any great certainty in a blind test. Well, at least that's a lot of money saved I thought at one stage since I wasn't going to cripple myself financially for a duplicate.



Then putting the discs into light rotation over an evening, all the soggy clichés about the 300B tube I had read in so many audio articles hit me all at once. Yes the highs were slightly recessed though spring water clear. Yes the mids were fleshier, carnal though not blowsy. Yes bass control was not exemplary but tonally superb. The total effect could only be described - consider my shame at recycling this hackneyed blurb - as beguiling. Oh, and the organic flow thang too.

Three brief examples. The interplay between EmmyLou Harris' and Daniel Lanois' voice-blended live takes and overdubbing was perfect. It never let reality intrude into the carefully fabricated artifice. The relentless crescendos in the succeeding Folias were naturally heart pounding while the homespun recording simplicity of Gould's Variations translated into Modernist austerity. I won't describe changes in the soundstage as my room reflections are of no interest to anyone [they'd be the same for either amp to make a specious argument - Ed] but to a forewarned ear they were both pronounced and pleasing. Still, the final feeling was that of the same amplifier playing in perceptibly diverse but equally entrancing registers.





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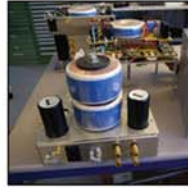


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Let's say we've got a nominal tie on all parameters. What about the price/value ratio? This is where pros go on the one hand this and on the other that, hem and haw, while I'll blurt it right out. No one who can afford to spend €16.300 list for the 300p should consider scrimping on the extra €5.000 or so for the VPAs even taking into account the enticing, expensive (over €1.500 list) and notionally effective VFS base obligatorily included with the smaller amp. Anything the 300p can do the VPA monoblocks can do as well or better. Power doesn't come into it though the 845s certainly do give you greater speaker choice.



The qualifying factors here are ultimate spatial authority (quite curiously more evident on Gould's mono takes) and bass mastery (courtesy of the VPAs' twinned output transformers and obvious when playing the Warren tribute), with low-level purity being separate but equal. Ergonomic considerations hardly intrude apart from the fierce 845 tube heat,



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IMMYLOU HARRIS



the monoblocks being bigger and heavier but vertical while controls are nearly identical and ideally thought out in both amps (which most definitely is not the case with the ungodly CDC spinner and attendant Nagra remote). So size does matter in the end it seems. Even so the 300p/Harbeth combo was the audio experience of this boomer's lifetime and it did not come cheap.

Personal interaction: Swiss, that is to say charmless but consistently impeccable.

Packing: Exemplary if super sized.

Instructions: Well illustrated, clear and exhaustive.

Website: Substandard.

*Michele Surdi*



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